John Dickson
Ed Mayo

May 23-July 6, 1980

The Corcoran Gallery of Art
Washington, D.C.

JOHN DICKSON

Variations of an Enigma is the title of the sculpture series on which John Dickson has been working for the past three years, and it has been aptly chosen. It implies ambiguity (variations) with a focus (enigma), and this same feeling and intent is incorporated in the actual work. These fragile, yet dynamic configurations, five of which are shown on this occasion, express a driving energy, movement and life that the viewer not only sees, but feels. Created out of a need to express his emotional reality, to vent or release his innermost feelings, *Variations of an Enigma* also reflects Dickson's technical and aesthetic experiments utilizing various materials for their pure visual and sensual effects. These drawings in space embody the artist's striving to convey a balance between sheerly formal concerns inherent to all sculpture, and a desire to create composite self-portraits.

Most of the pieces presented here are named after exotic animals, such as *Tegu, Hellbender, Conch* and *Boa*. These verbal references clarify the imagery of the work as they de-emphasize their elusive qualities. Dickson draws content out of his subconscious, then feels the need to tie down the work to a specific interest; the titles, many times inspired by dancers or plants or animals, allow him to accomplish this. However, it is not important for the viewer to necessarily comprehend why the artist has used a certain reference, in order to understand and appreciate the work of art.

Dickson's working process with each piece is, according to the artist, an agonizing ordeal. He can only enjoy and admire the sculptures once they are finished, and he no longer feels the necessity to change them. Generally, the artist will work on five pieces at once; he begins each by hanging a wooden box or cube from the ceiling. He then adds legs or stilts to the work, structuring and restructuring the sculpture, building it up with canvas, paint and other materials until a shape emerges that pleases him. Dickson selects the focus or title as the piece is being built. Because sketches and drawings are not part of the working process, the title clarifies the composition for him; that is, it helps to explain the origin of the finished form. For instance, as the funnel shape of *Conch*, 1979, was developing and growing outward, Dickson felt a need to know what motivated him to use it. The intricacy of a conch's calcified shell came to mind, and he decided to use the name of the natural object for the piece. It is interesting to note that animals are particularly fascinating to Dickson; he owns many different kinds.

Color interacts with shape to imbue each work with its singular character and mood. The large black figuration comprising the main body of *Hellbender*, 1979, alludes to this creature's mysterious structure, while the obstinance and mischievousness connoted by its name is further reflected in its shape. *Tegu*, 1979, elicits the sense of a dark inner sanctum, yet it is not really disturbing or frightening; instead, it is an optimistic and positive statement. In *Tegu*, outer arms, or tentacles, twist and swirl around a contained body, reminiscent of the form of a rocket shooting into space. The active, leaping quality of this work is indicative in general of the exploratory nature of the artist's working process.

Dickson addresses himself to discovering and uncovering his most authentic emotions and beliefs. The object becomes a visual record or diary of his working process as he loses himself in this act of exploration and searching. His visual and emotional investigation is constantly evolving; the sculptures, in turn, reflect strength, excitement, growth, courage and power. In this series, John Dickson truly asserts an individualized and complex form of expression.

Clair List



Tegu. 1979 Courtesy Diane Brown Gallery, Washington, D.C.

CHRONOLOGY

Born Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, November 4, 1949.
Awarded Yale-Norfolk Scholarship, Yale University, School of Art and Music, Norfolk, Connecticut, 1970.
Studied Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; B.F.A., 1971.
Studied Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri; M.F.A., 1973.
Moved to Washington, D.C., 1974.
Awarded Fellowship, Johnson Avenue Workshop, Washington, D.C., 1974-75.
Awarded Artist Fellowship, National Endowment for the Arts, 1979.

INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS

Washington, D.C., Pyramid Galleries Ltd., February 6-29, 1976.
Washington, D.C., Diane Brown Sculpture Space, October 4-November 8, 1980.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

New York City, Whitney Museum of American Art, "1975 Biennial Exhibition: Contemporary American Art," January 20-April 19, 1975.
Washington, D.C., Fraser's Stable Gallery, "Rockne Krebs and John Dickson," February 16-March 9, 1978.
Washington, D.C., Washington Project for the Arts, "Contemporary Washington Artists," January 10-February 10, 1979.
Washington, D.C., Corcoran Gallery of Art, "Gesture on Paper," December 29, 1979-February 24, 1980.
Washington, D.C., Diane Brown Sculpture Space, "Maquettes and Small Works," April 19-May 24, 1980.
Washington, D.C., Fendrick Gallery, "Couples," May-June 1980.

ED MAYO

Ed Mayo moved to Washington, D.C., in 1973, and in the next year, took a job at The Phillips Collection in the design and preparation department. The move, and more importantly Mayo's employment at The Phillips, greatly changed his previous art form to what it is today.

In 1971, while living in the southwest, Mayo was making sequential drawings composed of abstract figures or characters randomly repeated in an overall pattern. These figures often were applied to aluminum with acrylic lacquer, a medium that Mayo decided to try after seeing Billy Al Bengston's work. He became enamored of the lacquer's smooth surface and its enormous range of colors. By 1973, Mayo's sequential drawings had evolved into strip drawings reminiscent in format and content of film strips. Mayo's pictorial, or as the artist prefers, "written" narratives, portray changing seasons, cloud cycles and glacial formations; the subjects all revolve around the landscape and various natural and geological phenomena. It must be noted that Mayo's father was a geologist, and this factor has had a tremendous influence on the artist's choice of subject matter; his many years spent in the southwest has too.

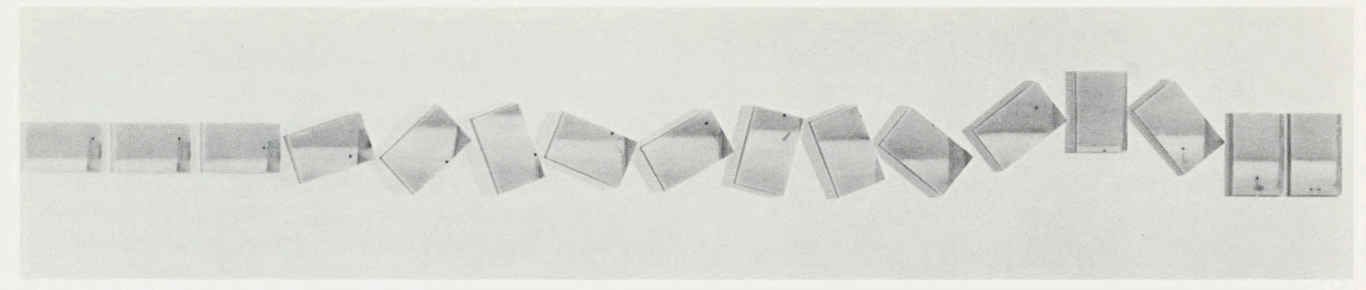
It was in 1974, when Mayo began working at The Phillips, that in the process of making exhibition labels, he discovered the technique of spraying liquitex on plexiglass. Fascinated by the smooth surface of the plexiglass and the intensity of the acrylic lacquer on this substance, he began to experiment. Beginning in a small format, the work eventually became physically and conceptually enlarged as the artist became more confident.

The working process begins as Mayo draws an outline of each panel of the composition on paper; he also makes a diagram of the overall configuration. He then glues this outline onto the plexiglass panel and, using an exacta knife, incises the drawing into the panel. Mayo subsequently removes the paper and begins to spray on the color with an airbrush, according to the outlines of the incised drawings.

It is perhaps Mayo's color that initially captures the viewer's interest and makes one want to study each frame. The palette ranges in tone and hue from delicate to intense, from soft to vibrant. Obviously the very material, which unlike canvas is translucent, provides Mayo with certain challenges. Because he uses plexiglass, Mayo must mix and build up thin coats of acrylic lacquer in order to achieve the desired color. When he attains this, the artist then sprays opaque white over the color which not only seals and protects the already applied hue, but gives it a double intensity as it blocks out light which could filter through the color and modify it. Mayo has learned to manipulate the physical properties of light and color.

The colors are not objectively accurate to the scenes depicted; instead, they are determined by Mayo's subjective feelings about the narratives portrayed. Mayo feels that the art of Washington in general and the Washington Color School in particular have greatly influenced his color sense, liberating him to freely use intense color. Before he moved to Washington, he says he was overwhelmed by its power and indeed often muted the acrylic lacquers. After having studied the work of Morris Louis and others, he gained the confidence to experiment with an enormous range of color. The color visually reinforces the evocation of actual landscape, but it also functions to stimulate other associations in the viewer's mind.

The ideas for Mayo's narrative works are inspired by his past. For instance, as a child, the artist spent a great deal of time in and around the Grand Canyon, and it was this that he used for his first large-scale piece, completed in 1978. Consisting of approximately 140 panels, it recapitulates the evolution and formation of the canyon, not in a strictly scientific or geological manner, but with a metaphoric sense. Mayo expresses not a literal description of the event, but his own feelings for the site and his awe for its grandeur and beauty. The image can be read vertically from left to right or as a whole abstract image. This piece, as with all of Mayo's work, forces the viewer to look closely and concentrate



Cleaved Rocks. 1978 Private Collection

on the color and images, as the panels alternate between close-up and long shot.

Around 1978, the shape of Mayo's works began to change as he became bored with his continual use of overall rectilinear, or columnar, placement. The result of this desire to change the juxtapositional approach among image panels was *Cleaved Rocks,* 1978, which visually corresponds to the motion of a rock falling off a cliff. The panels, which are placed horizontally along the wall, actually tilt as they follow the jerky movement of the rock on its bumpy journey. After this, Mayo completed *Landing,* 1979, which captures one bird's flight through the air. As a student in Santa Barbara, Mayo would spend endless hours at the beach studying the gulls as they soared through the landscape. He became fascinated with the concept of flight, and what the bird was actually seeing while going through the air. *Landing's* configuration follows a bird's flight pattern as it goes up and down the wall, while the color and imagery within each panel project his view of the scene.

Mayo is still working today with aerial maneuvers as his panels explore the phenomenon of flight. However, he has also begun to pursue a new avenue; that is, depicting certain psychological states. His first attempt at this, *Feeling So Fine,* 1979-80, visually and emotionally portrays what a staggering drunk sees while walking along the street, finally finding home. The colors are jarring; and the placement of the panels (three of which actually revolve) evoke spinning and turning movements. The viewer is made to empathize with the wino's sense of distress.

Mayo's bold color sense and his mastery of the plexiglass medium have enabled him to explore his past and his own innermost feelings. However, a portion of Mayo's creative process relies on the viewer bringing his or her own story to the art. In order to completely experience and appreciate the artist's art form, it is necessary that the viewer poetically free associate through the images.

Clair List

CHRONOLOGY

Born Redlands, California, April 15, 1944.
Studied University of Arizona, Tucson; B.F.A., 1968.
Studied University of California, Santa Barbara; M.F.A., 1970.
Moved to Washington, D.C., 1973.
Worked at The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., 1974-76.
Worked as Chief of Installation and Design, University Art Gallery, University of Maryland, College Park, 1976-80.

INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS

Washington, D.C., Diane Brown Gallery, September 12-October 12, 1978.
Washington, D.C., Diane Brown Gallery, November 11-December 12, 1980.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Washington, D.C., Washington Project for the Arts, "Drawings from Studios of D.C. Artists," October 21-November 15, 1975.
Washington, D.C., Washington Project for the Arts, "Second Anniversary Show," April 12-May 7, 1977.
Washington, D.C., Washington Project for the Arts, "Emerging Washington Painters: A Selection," September 4-29, 1979.
Washington, D.C., Middendorf/Lane, "Small Works," September 11-29, 1979.

CATALOGUE OF THE EXHIBITION

JOHN DICKSON

Conch. 1979
Mixed media, 8′2″ x 6′6″ x 7′4″
Courtesy Diane Brown Gallery, Washington, D.C.
Hellbender. 1979
Mixed media, 7′11″ x 6′3″ x 9′10″
Courtesy Diane Brown Gallery, Washington, D.C.
Tegu. 1979
Mixed media, 8′7″ x 5′3″ x 5′2″
Courtesy Diane Brown Gallery, Washington, D.C.
Boa. 1980
Mixed media, 8′9″ x 6′2″ x 8′2″
Courtesy Diane Brown Gallery, Washington, D.C.
Orb. 1980
Mixed media, 6′10″ x 3′10″ x 5′9″
Courtesy Diane Brown Gallery, Washington, D.C.

ED MAYO

Cleaved Rocks. 1978
Acrylic on plexiglass, 1′ x 11′9″
Private Collection
Geese. 1979
Acrylic on plexiglass, 5′ x 17′
Collection Diane Brown
Landing. 1979
Acrylic on plexiglass, 11′ x 35′
Courtesy Diane Brown Gallery, Washington, D.C.
Loop. 1979
Acrylic on plexiglass, 8′4″ x 8′2″
Courtesy Diane Brown Gallery, Washington, D.C.
Feeling So Fine. 1979-80
Acrylic on plexiglass, 5′4″ x 23′2⅞″
Courtesy Diane Brown Gallery, Washington, D.C.